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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses misconceptions about the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). Advocates claim that there has never been a statewide school reform of KERA's significance and magnitude. However, Kentucky legislators, both in 1909 and in the mid-1950s, passed governance and finance reforms considered to be as revolutionary as those of KERA. A second claim of KERA advocates is that the myriad of unrelated KERA components are in agreement with the national school reform movement; however, when closely examined, the legislation contains inconsistencies and competing aims. Finally, there is the argument that statewide economic woes are due primarily to poor education; whereas, the reverse is true--Kentucky education has been inadequate due to the lack of industry and leadership to support good schools. Historically, there have been four competing views about school reform and improvement: the humanist view, advocating the teaching of music, poetry, and philosophy; the social efficiency movement, stressing the importance of providing an education that has meaning and social utility; the developmentalist view, stressing consideration of children's mental and psychological development when providing learning experiences; and the social meliorists, who believe that the purpose of education is to improve the social condition of children born into poverty and neglect. KERA draws much of its appeal from the fact that all reformers can recognize their vision of school improvement in the Act. However, supporters of KERA who believe that all involved have an equal stake in the Act probably underestimate complexities and competing interests. The author's primary interest in KERA is in its emphasis on site-based councils, extended school services, family and youth service centers, and enhancement and retention of small schools that serve multiple needs of rural communities. (LP)

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Whose KERA Is It Anyway?

by Alan J. DeYoung

Educational reform, after all, is not primarily about instructional objectives. It is primarily a refocusing and reform of social and political objectives.

Supporters of the Kentucky Education Reform Act rightly point out that "all eyes are on Kentucky," because ours is one of the very few states which is currently attempting systemic and comprehensive school reform. KERA supporters are somewhat less candid about other aspects of KERA as they strive to explain and defend the Act, however. In their zeal to convince us about the sanctity of KERA, advocates conveniently overstate or misstate important facts. Ironically, KERA aficionados seem to fear that a public, educated about the complexities and vagaries of KERA, will lose faith in its ostensible magic before the enemies of a well-educated citizenry are vanquished.

As an academic, three particular misconceptions about KERA appear to me most blatant. The first is the claim that never before has there been statewide school reform of KERA's significance and magnitude. This is an arguable assertion. Kentucky legislators twice this century, in 1909 and in the mid-1950s, passed governance and finance reforms considered at the time virtually as revolutionary as those of KERA. Redefining equitable and adequate funding formulas, as well as devising interesting accountability mechanisms, happens often in Kentucky and other states. They will happen again.

A second persistent claim of KERA advocates is that the myriad of unrelated KERA components in governance, finance and curriculum fit seamlessly together in a context of unilateral agreement among national school reformers regarding the merits of these KERA policies and strategies. This is clearly an overstatement at best. For a set of policies put together quickly by a committee, KERA is an impressive piece of work. But there are inconsistencies and competing aims within the legislation. Some of these points require the sort of discussion only possible in a longer format; others I review below.

Finally, there is the argument that our statewide economic woes are primarily due to poor education. As an educator, I would argue the reverse: Kentucky schools are comparatively poor because we have historically not had the sort of industry and leadership to provide good schools. We'd all like to believe that better schools will bring about better jobs: I believe that better jobs will bring about better schools. A good example of this may be in Scott County where Toyota is apparently having a large impact upon school quality there. I don't believe Toyota was attracted to Scott County because the elementary and secondary schools were particularly good at the time.

In any event, much of the rhetoric behind KERA is inflated and uncritical. Other portions are only partly accurate. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't support the Act, for it is clearly a dramatic and important piece of legislation with great potential for improving our schools and our state. On the other hand, keeping silent on the overstatements and improbable claims about KERA may in the long run prove counterproductive. KERA will be challenged and amended in legislative sessions ahead, but hopefully for the right reasons.

KERA in Historical Perspective

School reform in the U.S. has a 150-year history, and KERA is clearly now part of this history. Herbert Kliebard of the University of Wisconsin argues that there have been four competing visions about school reform and improvement during this period, which he describes as the Humanist, Social Efficiency, Developmentalist, and Social Meliorist educational reform advocates. In the age when mastering the liberal arts and humanities were syn-

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onymous with schooling, cultivating the intellect and preparing for the life of a "gentleman" was the focus of education. We in academia still carry seeds of this hope to most of our classes. Thus, when talk of systemic school improvement surfaces, humanists flock to the schoolhouse with visions of expanding the teaching of music, poetry, philosophy and civics to the masses.

Humanists were roundly criticized by the group Kliebard describes as social efficiency aficionados in the late nineteenth century. These folk were much more pragmatic in their educational concerns, and wanted to make sure that whatever was being taught in the public school was being taught because it had real-world vocational or social utility for students once they left school. They were also most concerned that whatever was being taught was being taught efficiently and effectively.

Supporters of KERA who believe that all Kentuckians have an equal stake in the Act probably underestimate its complexities and competing interests.

Such a competing philosophy of education led to interesting battles between humanists and social efficiency proponents earlier this century, just as they do today. Then, for instance, humanists' proposals for extending the teaching of Greek in our high schools in the early twentieth century--because it was the language of culture and art--were beaten back by social efficiency proponents. They claimed that Greek was not only a dead language, but that it cost too much to teach compared to French or German. The teaching of Greek was thus relegated to colleges and universities, still the domain of humanists.

Then there were the developmentalists. Developmentalists argued that whatever passed for education had to have its origin within the mind and experience of the child. Education could not and should not be imposed from without, for all children go through stages of mental and psychological development which determines what and when they can learn. Since both the humanists and the social efficiency camps urged the teaching of someone else's knowledge, developmentalists rejected both of those perspectives on formal schooling.

Kliebard labels his final category of historical school reformers as social meliorists. These folk believed that improving the social condition of children born to poverty and neglect ought to be the primary focus of public schools. And they believed that public schools could and should be the agency which investigated and helped to solve the social problems of the day. Social ameliorate advocates argued that the humanists were too tied to the past; that the social efficiency folks would primarily enhance the mindless economic development trajectories of a culture losing touch with human and community needs; and that developmentalism might elucidate some educational means, but had nothing to say about the desirable social aims of schooling.

Kliebard and KERA

If you are like me, you probably found yourself identifying with one or another of Kliebard's categories. You may also concur with him, and me, that they are often mutually exclusive. The battle between different educational reform groups holding different educational philosophies has raged now since the late nineteenth century. There are few rational grounds to judge which educational philosophy is "correct," for they are each attached to competing social values, and they each have their supporters and defenders.

Kliebard does argue, however, that significant school reform has occurred this century when two or more of the four groups have come briefly together; i.e., when one group's solution appeals to one or several other groups. Civil rights, desegregation and the expansion of schooling in the 1960s might be a good example: Here, social meliorists were convinced that equality of educational opportunity could solve the social problems of racism and unemploy-

ment; social efficiency advocates believed that more schooling for everyone would have positive benefit for the national economy; humanists would get more kids in college to teach; and developmentalists opened up free schools where there were no adult rules for children to follow. Of course, thirty years later, we still have racism, underemployment, not enough philosophers, and few "free schools" or "open" classrooms.

KERA, too, draws much of its appeal from the fact that believers in each of Kliebard's four educational philosophers can see their vision of school improvement in the Act. Social efficiency supporters love the way KERA speaks to schooling for better employees and transitions to the world of work. They also love the accountability proposals, where rewards and sanctions based on new competency tests will drive which schools and which teachers get monetary incentives for good performance. Some developmentalists, on the other hand, love ungraded primaries and hope for restructured high schools where no children will fail because "all children can achieve at high levels."

We in academia, as I noted before, continue to believe that well-educated high school students will love the sort of humanities classes we teach here, and that KERA will bring about a flowering of enthusiasm for literature, music and civic participation. Most of my colleagues haven't heard yet about the mission of some KERA advocates who claim higher education will have to be restructured next. These folk claim that our reputed lecture courses--which make students, rather than the instructors, accountable for learning--are on the way out. Supposedly, the excited learners produced by KERA at the high school level will find commonwealth institutions of higher education boring in the future, which will demand new ways of teaching by university faculty.

Which gets me, at last, to the point. Supporters of KERA who believe that all Kentuckians have an equal stake in the Act probably underestimate the complexities and competing interests. As a "communitarian" in the social meliorist tradition, my primary KERA interest is in its emphasis on site-based councils, extended school services, and family and youth service centers. I am much less enamored with all the millions of dollars being spent on measuring learner outcomes in novel ways, or spent on technology. As education dollars either fall short or get redirected to other government programs, I will complain about the lack of money for enhancing and retaining small schools which serve multiple needs of rural communities in the face of those who chant about "world class standards" and call for ever greater expenditures on better portfolio assessments and more computers in the classroom.

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My educational values center upon the importance of using schools to enhance communities and link children to those communities. So, I will speak highly of the KERA objectives that address these values. I will remain skeptical and critical of the ones which conflict with my values. Educational reform, after all, is not primarily about instructional objectives. It is primarily a refocusing and reform of social and political objectives. KERA is neither the beginning nor the end of such refocusing. Rather, it is an effort at recreating the "common wealth." We all have a continuing stake in debating and facilitating the common wealth, not just in implementing KERA.

Note: For further consideration, see Herbert Kliebard, Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1953, *Boston, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1986.*